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	OIC-00	OIG-00	NIMA-00	PA-00	GIWI-00	PRS-00	P-00
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SUBJECT: GABON: SEVERAL INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS ARE SUSPENDED FOR  
"VIOLATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS"

1. (U). Summary: After several months of a more open press environment during Gabon's political transition, the National Council for Communication (CNC) suspended six independent newspapers from one to three months for "violations of the principles of professional ethics." Several of the suspended newspapers were associated with opposition parties and presidential election candidates who ran against winner Ali Bongo, and were critical of the electoral process and Bongo. Communications Minister and Bongo ally Laure Gondjout led the crackdown, and may also have had personal motives for the suspensions. Ultimately, reigning in the press may suit the strong executive style of Ali Bongo. End Summary

Delayed Reaction by Government to Journalists' Criticism during Transition

2. (U) Gabon's National Council for Communication (CNC) on November 10 suspended six independent newspapers from one to three months beginning immediately for "violations of the principles of professional conduct and ethics" during the political transition following the death in June 2009 of Pres. Omar Bongo. "Nku'u Le Messenger" and "Le Crocodile" were suspended for one month, "Le Scriboullard," "L'Ombre," and "La Nation" received two months suspensions, and "Les Echos du Nord" received a three month suspension. Two other private publications, "Le Temps" and "Gabon d'Abord" received a warning to maintain professional standards. In addition, a call-in chat show, "Entre Nous," on the private TV station Canal Espoir was suspended indefinitely for "deficiencies in moderating the program."

3. (U) The CNC spokesperson said the suspended newspapers passed on rumors and insults, were responsible for 'lazy journalism,' and created ethnic divisions. One article cited from "Nku'u Le Messenger" entitled "And the Monarchy is Installed in Gabon" criticized the electoral process that resulted in the election victory of Omar Bongo's son, Ali Bongo. Prior to the August 30 election, several of the accused newspapers raised ethnic and other factors that might determine the winner of the election, and were critical of the succession of power within the Bongo family.

4. (U) The suspensions have been widely criticized by international NGOs concerned with the protection of journalist freedoms. Norbert Ngoua, president of the private Gabonese press association APPEL and director of one of the banned journals, "Nku'u Le Messenger", said in an interview that the CNC did not provide any details about the newspapers' specific press violations, and the journalists are not legally allowed to appeal the suspensions.

Return to Media Control of Omar Bongo Era?

5. (SBU) Many Gabonese journalists believe the suspensions reflect the commitment of the new Gabonese administration to continue Omar Bongo's control of the media. Prior to his death, Omar Bongo used suspensions to punish newspapers that published articles critical of the President, his family and his wealth.

¶6. (SBU) The current crackdown is attributed to Minister of Communications Laure Gondjout. A strong Bongo supporter, her involvement is seen by some as proof that the selection of these publications is directly tied to their links with opposition parties and candidates in the August 30 election. "Nku'u Le Messenger" and "Le Scribouillard", for example, have been more politically oriented to the UPG party (Gabonese People's Union) led by opposition leader and election second runner-up, Pierre Mamboundou. "L'Ombre" has been linked to ruling party defector and election runner-up Andre Mba Obame, and he is rumored to have paid for articles there. "Les Echos du Nord" is associated with former vice-premier and presidential candidate Paul Mba Abessole of the RPG party (Rally for Gabon). Several of the suspended newspapers presented views of opposition candidates in the election, and "Le Scribouillard" and "Le Crocodile" are satirical journals that frequently take aim at Gabon's political figures.

#### Minister Gondjout Benefits from Government Media Funds

7.(SBU) In addition, several of the suspended newspapers printed articles about Minister Gondjout's personal benefits from the allocation of government funds for the media. FCFA 500 million (USD 1.13 million) is allocated each year by the government to the printed press, and Gabonews, the internet press organization which is owned by Minister Gondjout, has received a large portion of these funds for the past two years. To some observers, the suspensions provided an opportunity for Gondjout to silence her critics.

#### Comment

¶8. (SBU) We were surprised that the CNC cracked down on the independent newspapers a month after Ali Bongo's inauguration. As reported previously, Gabon's media opened up during the political transition and presented serious analysis of the issues, candidates, and the electoral process. Even "L'Union," the daily newspaper that presents the government's viewpoints, was critical of mishandled electoral lists and bungled election-day balloting. Since the inauguration, the press overall has been receptive to rather than critical of Bongo's government reforms. A key factor at play with the suspensions may be the effort of Communications Minister Gondjout to return the media to a more controlled environment as the President makes changes in the government and the way Gabon is run. Although Bongo has promised to run a more efficient government, he is already showing signs of doing it with a firm hand that is likely to include reigning in the press. End Comment